Developments

Volume 26, Issue 1 | Spring 2006

Addiction Treatment With an Aboriginal Focus

Services for Aboriginal Albertans have long been a priority at AADAC. Early in AADAC's history, its forward-looking staff sought to establish addictions treatment with an Aboriginal focus. They asked leaders in the Aboriginal community for help in hiring and training staff to offer culturally sensitive treatment. One of those leaders, Maggie Hodgson (former executive director of Nechi Training, Research and Health Promotions Institute, now an officer of the Order of Canada), recalls that she and others asked that AADAC instead fund Aboriginal people to set up their own treatment programs, with Aboriginal administration and Aboriginal counsellors. Treatment tailored to Aboriginal people's needs in Alberta has continued to operate on that model, as has addiction prevention, addiction information, and training in addictions services.

The AADAC Aboriginal Committee ensures that Aboriginal issues in addictions continue to be raised and that treatment services for Aboriginal people continue to be offered. The committee includes representatives from across AADAC's reach (geographically and in terms of types of service) and from agencies funded by AADAC. Some committee members are of Aboriginal descent; others have a strong interest in, knowledge about, and experience with, Aboriginal culture.

This issue of *Developments* highlights Aboriginal addictions treatment programs in Alberta that are funded by AADAC. It includes important information for counsellors who work with Aboriginal clients, and gives us a glimpse into the power of Aboriginal spirituality with a description of the sacred use of tobacco as a part of recovery from addiction. It also includes a listing of AADAC's funded Aboriginal agencies in Alberta.

Aboriginal Addiction Treatment in Alberta

Leonard O'Kanee describes himself as having been an angry and spiritually bankrupt young man. Having grown up in residential schools and foster homes, he felt disconnected from his own culture.

"But I've always had this gnawing feeling in my stomach that something was missing," says O'Kanee. "When I came to Poundmaker's Lodge, when they talked about spirituality, that's when I started connecting the pieces."

While there, he promised himself that he would go back to school. Today he has a bachelor's degree in social work and is a counsellor at Poundmaker's Lodge Treatment Centre in St. Albert, inspiring new clients with his story.

When AADAC began funding community organizations in 1971, Poundmaker's was among the first to offer treatment with an emphasis on Aboriginal spirituality. Since then, it has grown in size and reputation, attracting international attention as a model in effective addictions treatment for indigenous people. Executive director Leona Carter says her staff is swamped with university students wanting to visit and study at the centre.

AADAC funds Aboriginal programming in communities across the province. Agencies with an Aboriginal focus offer a range of services to Albertans suffering from addictions to alcohol, tobacco, other drugs and gambling: services that include shelter, detoxification, outpatient counselling, residential treatment and support for transition to aftercare. Once approved for funding, agencies submit yearly business plans which must align with AADAC's business plan. Within these broad parameters, however, agencies retain their autonomy and are governed by their own boards of directors.

"We don't want to create a whole bunch of little AADACs," emphasizes Christine Lemermeyer, AADAC program consultant for Calgary. "A lot of [these agencies] have very distinct ideas about how to provide service to their communities, and they are really successful."

Blayne Blackburn, until recently the AADAC program consultant for northern Alberta, agrees. "There was a recognition that government cannot do this on their own. We need and value community."

Blackburn sees the relationship between government and agencies as complementary and symbiotic. AADAC provides agencies with support and advocacy. In turn, agencies provide specific services and alert AADAC to issues arising at the community level.

Being flexible and responsive to the changing needs of community is one of the agencies' greatest strengths, according to Blackburn. For instance, a counsellor working in an isolated northern region might go hunting with the men in order to get to the core of the issues facing that community. By engaging in this traditional practice, he will share in their legends and teachings. Building relationships through storytelling is a key element in the recovery process, and this is especially true for Aboriginal people with a narrative culture.

AADAC recognizes the need for specialized Aboriginal services. The long-standing Aboriginal Committee provides advice for AADAC's programming and maintains a strong relationship with agencies offering Aboriginal services. "And more importantly," says Kurt Kimball, chair of the committee, "we learn from the rich cultural background of Aboriginal people and hope to be a conduit for this learning to enrich all of AADAC's services."

Relationship building is an important theme in all addictions treatment, but it is especially so for programs that have an Aboriginal focus. Relationship building is the foundation for programming at Sunrise Native Addictions Services in Calgary, says program manager Bryan Flack. He explains that "the major component of addiction is isolation. So, if you look at healing, that means community." Clients and staff alike start each day by greeting each other in the ceremonial room. Shaped like a giant teepee in the centre of their new 20,000 square foot facility, this sacred space also houses other traditional practices such as smudging ceremonies and sharing circles.

Programming at many of the agencies is based on the teachings of the medicine wheel, a circle divided into four equal slices, representing the components of humanity: the physical,

mental, emotional and spiritual. Clients learn to nurture and balance these elements by caring for their bodies with exercise and nutrition; challenging their minds by understanding their addiction; managing their emotions through awareness and acceptance of their feelings; and feeding their spirits with traditional healing ceremonies.

Like Leonard O'Kanee, many clients, even though they are Aboriginal, are not familiar with Aboriginal spiritual practices when they arrive for treatment. This disconnection gives rise to identity crisis, according to Eve MacMillan, executive director of Sunrise NAS. "They really don't walk in either world. You're not actually Indian enough, but you're not actually Caucasian enough either." For these clients, being reconnected to their culture is an integral part of their recovery.

This is also the case for many non-Aboriginal clients, who "end up at our doors, seeking wholeness," adds Flack. What they find when they arrive "is a sense of kindness and generosity, which is a tradition of First Nations people. Rather than a very clinical approach, it's always 'Hey, welcome! Come on in.'"

Sunrise NAS boasts a success rate of 95 per cent, measured as the proportion of clients who demonstrate an improved quality of life three months after graduation. Flack attributes this success partly to their policy of inviting past clients back to participate in group counselling or sweat lodge ceremonies, in order to maintain the relationships formed during treatment.

Flack also emphasizes the importance of ongoing support: "It's not only for these six weeks that [clients] need support. They need to find support for their whole lives." For many, although not all, some of that support comes from self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA and Narcotics Anonymous meetings are held at Sunrise NAS, and before a client leaves the program, she or he will often already have made a connection with a sponsor from a support group in their own community.

Flack says that to his knowledge, none of the self-help groups has a specifically Aboriginal focus, but there are other means of support that follow naturally from what clients learn at Sunrise NAS. Having been introduced to sweat lodge ceremonies at Sunrise NAS, for example, clients can attend community sweat lodges once they return to the community.

As Flack explains, "It's not just the things we do that make it an Aboriginal-based agency, but it's the way that we view the world. .The main thing is that we are all connected."

Working With Aboriginal Clients in Addictions Treatment

In his early days as an addictions counsellor, Lawrence Derry made a mistake that forever altered his outlook on helping Aboriginal clients. Today, 20 years of substantial and varied experience later, he is the director of training at the Nechi Training, Research and Health Promotions Institute, a place that actually specializes in Aboriginal addictions training.

"The greatest lesson I learned as a counsellor was to never assume based on a person's apparent ethnic background," he says. Lawrence describes his attempt at assisting a client who looked Aboriginal: "I spoke to this person in terms of traditional cultural beliefs such as

pipe ceremonies, sweat lodges, and sweet grass. To this, the person replied, 'I am a Christian.'" Because of his lack of awareness, Lawrence says, he made the client feel uncomfortable. "I believe this impeded my client's assessment, treatment planning, and treatment. My problem was making assumptions. I was not sensitive to that person's experience." Lawrence says that, with experience as a counsellor, he "quit giving out answers, and started to listen and not just hear."

Vi Meck, an addictions counsellor of Métis background, agrees with the importance of listening, learning, and not making assumptions. "I was not raised in the traditional way and for a long time had no interest in Aboriginal culture," she says. More than 12 years ago and before becoming a counsellor, Vi was a client seeking help for her own addictions. "At the time, I would have been offended if someone had suggested sending me to an Aboriginal treatment facility."

Dick Peterson, an AADAC counsellor with 25 years of experience, says that while it's important not to assume an Aboriginal person follows a traditional lifestyle, neither should counsellors assume the opposite—that the client's lifestyle is similar to their own. "Particularly as new counsellors, it can be easy to assume that everyone has the same values as we do, and ignore the fact that the client has a different history. You really need to listen, to find out what they want and need. Only then can you discuss the variety of options available."

Corinne Lewis, a counsellor of Cree lineage, says, "You have to take a look at the person's background. Are they coming from an Aboriginal community and moving to the city? It can be quite a culture shock for them. A lot of times, these communities are isolated and don't have a lot of services, then suddenly they're in the big city and everything is so different." According to Lawrence, "When we talk of Aboriginal culture, we are really talking about many cultures. We have to be respectful of people's language, traditions, beliefs, and lifestyles. Also, be aware that Aboriginal people are often not proficient in English because of the languages spoken in their communities."

The counsellors offer these tips for working respectfully and effectively with clients of Aboriginal origin:

1. **Involve your client in creating their treatment plan.** This will ensure their beliefs and needs are taken into consideration.
2. **Be aware that your communication styles may differ.** For example, in mainstream Western culture, long pauses in the conversation may feel uncomfortable or may signal disinterest. For some Aboriginal cultures, conversational pauses are a time to reflect. There may also be differences in body language or eye contact. For example, counsellors may have to learn not to take it personally if a client chooses not to look at them while talking or listening; it may be considered courteous and respectful behaviour in the client's culture.
3. **Remember their history.** Aboriginal people have suffered cultural genocide and have been treated with disrespect since colonization. Many are trying to get their own self-respect and identity back, have endured poverty and have been raised with uncertainty about their future. If you see Aboriginal clients in this context (but, again, without making assumptions and generalizations), it may be easier for you to have reasonable expectations, and to understand their needs, concerns and responses.
4. **Give them the chance to reclaim their culture.** It is natural for some Aboriginal people to want to go back to their roots and learn the traditional ways. It is crucial to present

clients with all possible treatment options, mainstream and Aboriginal, to enable them to seek traditional treatment if they choose.

5. **Take an Aboriginal cultural training course.** Learning about other cultures helps you to respect clients from those cultures and empathize with them, as well as avoid cultural misunderstandings.
6. **Use personal anecdotes and always talk from the heart.** When you are dealing with an Aboriginal client, be aware that stories are important.
7. **Keep language simple and short.** English may not be a client's first language, and education may not have been a priority for them.
8. **Respect, honesty, sharing and kindness,** says Emil Durocher, are the four traditional Aboriginal values. It is important to use these at all times with your clients.

Lawrence Derry offers this last piece of advice: "We need to allow the client to be part of the assessment and treatment process. We can't assume, we can't dictate, because that robs the client of the opportunity to make their own decisions. For counsellors, it is not important to have answers, or The Answer, but rather, it's vital to provide clients with directions that will allow them to own their own recovery."

Sacred Tobacco: Its Role in Healing From Addiction

"This pipe is like a child. If you abuse it, it will eventually come back to hurt you." Aboriginal elder Emil Durocher paused and allowed his statement to be absorbed by the group participating in his pipe ceremony. They nodded with understanding.

The round stone ceremonial room at Poundmaker's Lodge was filled with the aromas of burning cedar, sage, and tobacco. Men and women had quietly entered, offering cigarettes or small packets of tobacco to Emil. He returned everyone's smiles, and patiently waited while they found places to sit on the pelts lining the floor. A long pipe rested familiarly in his hands, and while he spoke to the group, he alternately patted tobacco into its stone bowl and onto a plate of smouldering herbs.

With each word, it was evident he was speaking from his heart and had empathy for those around him. This ceremony was both spiritual and educational. For some participants, it was a way to seek guidance while learning and being embraced by a culture that had previously seemed foreign to them despite their ancestry. For others, it was a place of healing in an environment where they felt a sense of belonging. Regardless of their backgrounds, they regarded Emil with respect and valued his guidance.

To an outsider, Emil's analogy about the pipe could seem shocking or confusing, but to those seated around him, it was clear. They had come to Poundmaker's Lodge Treatment Centre for help with their addictions and had already felt the consequences of abusing a substance. They had seen something that seemed small and harmless at first—alcohol, tobacco or other drugs—grow and overpower them. "If you abuse it, it will come back to hurt you."

It may appear odd to ask a person with an addiction to cigarettes or any other drug to sit in a room filled with tobacco smoke or, moreover, to puff on a pipe filled with it. However, First Nations elders like Emil believe that educating their people about the sacred use of tobacco

will help them to develop respect for it and therefore be less likely to abuse it. They also believe spiritual ceremonies such as pipe, sweat and smudge will ultimately help people to build inner strength and a sense of self, which can in turn help them overcome substance abuse or prevent it altogether. Emil has been an addictions counsellor for 20 years and has seen the positive impact of including sacred tobacco ceremonies as part of the healing process.

The spiritual uses of tobacco vary substantially among Aboriginal groups in Canada and are too many to list in this article, so individual perspectives are given. Most Inuit people do not hold it sacred at all, but for many First Nations and Métis peoples, it is used both for offerings and as a messenger (see the Nechi Institute publication, *Tobacco: A Cultural Approach to Addiction and Recovery for Aboriginal Youth*).

According to Emil, offerings of tobacco such as those he received at the beginning of the pipe ceremony are intended as a gesture of gratitude. He takes them into the mountains to sprinkle on the ground as a way of thanking Mother Earth. The cigarettes will not be smoked. They will be unrolled and their tobacco emptied.

"At one time the tobacco was given to a person, usually a medicine man, for their pipe. When you ask for something, it is always respectful to give something in return."

The tobacco used in the pipe ceremonies serves a different purpose—a way of communicating with the Creator. Melvin Ironshirt of the Blood Tribe Tobacco Control Strategy Project explains, "Tobacco is used as a messenger—like a phone, when we pray or make peace with other tribes, or settle land disputes. Or even when asking for marriage. Tobacco and pipe is used to settle it. The only time tobacco is put in the pipe is when it will be used to send our messages into the heavens."

Sacred tobacco is rarely found in the store. Melvin explains, "The tobacco you find over the counter is so full of chemicals; it lingers down on the ground, down where our children are, forcing them to breathe second-hand smoke. It does not flow up to the heavens." Emil likens cigarette smoke to factory smoke and says it does not send a message at all. Speaking of commercial tobacco, he says, "The creator gave people tobacco to use as medicine. It wasn't what it is today—a lot of things have been added to something sacred, it's not sacred anymore."

Melvin and the Blood Tribe Tobacco Control Strategy Project grow organic tobacco for use in sacred ceremonies and run educational programs to teach its correct use, with the hope this will prevent people from abusing tobacco and subsequently dying from its toxins.

"Elders have been smoking herbs, plants, and roots for thousands of years." Melvin said. "It is so important to get our young people back into tradition, to understand why tobacco should be treated with respect. And to save lives."

Communities Offering Services Funded by AADAC

Addiction Prevention, Treatment and Information With an Aboriginal Focus

May 2006

NORTHERN ALBERTA

High Level
Action North Recovery Centre
780-926-3113

High Prairie
Métis Indian Town Alcohol Association
780-523-3372

Wabasca and **Calling Lake***
(Agency to be named soon)

Peerless Lake
Peerless Lake Healing Centre
780-869-2544

CENTRAL ALBERTA

Bonnyville
Bonnyville Indian Métis Rehabilitation Centre
780-826-3328

Fishing Lake
Fishing Lake Métis Settlement Addictions Program
780-943-2202

St. Albert
Nechi Training, Research and Health Promotions Institute
780-459-1884/1-800-459-1884

Poundmaker's Lodge Treatment Centre
780-458-1884

Red Deer
Métis Nation Local 84
403-340-2416

Rocky Mountain House
Rocky Native Friendship Centre
403-845-2788

SOUTHERN ALBERTA

Calgary
Sunrise Native Addictions Services
403-261-7921

* Please note that AADAC agency funding is in transition for the Wabasca-Calling Lake area. Check aadac.com in the fall of 2006 for an update on these locations.

The Back Page

AADAC RESOURCES

For the following resources, Albertans can contact their local AADAC office. For those outside Alberta, all resources can be ordered through AADAC Resource Development (contact information below resource descriptions). Prices listed below do not include GST, shipping and handling.

The Truth About Tobacco Series
In contrast to the sacred use of tobacco discussed in this issue of Developments, the Truth About Tobacco series features various topics concerning the addictive use of tobacco. Information is carefully researched and clearly presented in a brief four-page format. Three new titles have just been introduced:

The Truth About the Tobacco Industry identifies the major tobacco corporations in Canada and offers insight into the ways in which tobacco is currently being marketed.

The Truth About Social Smoking concisely describes social smoking: what it is and why people do it. Other topics include alcohol and social smoking, social smoking and smoking bans, and social smoking and addiction.

The Truth About Nicotine Replacement Therapies (NRTs) gives the reader a good overview of these popular quit-smoking aids. The information sheet includes a detailed description of different types of NRTs, and the way each type works. Vital information offered in this resource includes the affect NRTs can have on other medications, when *not* to use NRTs, and NRTs and addiction.

Previously released titles in the Truth About Tobacco series include the following:

The Truth About...

- Smoking
- Spit Tobacco
- Second-Hand Smoke
- Smoking and Pregnancy
- Options for Quitting Smoking
- What to Expect When Quitting Smoking

Individual copies of each leaflet in the Truth About Tobacco series are available through your local AADAC office at no cost. Multiple copies can be ordered through your AADAC office at a cost of $5 per bundle of 20 (each topic sold separately). Those residing outside Alberta can also order multiple copies in bundles of 20 (for the same price, plus GST, shipping and handling), by contacting AADAC Resource Development.

TO ORDER AADAC RESOURCES: For residents of Alberta, small quantities of most AADAC

resources are available free of charge through your nearest AADAC office. Within North America, order through our online catalogue, order by regular post, or call toll-free 1-800-280-9616. To order from outside of North America, call 780-427-7319, send orders by regular post, or e-mail us at rdm@aadac.gov.ab.ca. Our postal address is

AADAC Resource Development
#200, 10909 Jasper Avenue NW
Edmonton, AB, Canada T5J 3M9

AADAC must receive payment for our resources (either by credit card or cheque) before we will ship them. To protect the security of your credit card number, AADAC will not accept fax orders. Ordering online with a credit card ensures faster service. If ordering by regular post, please include your cheque along with your order, and please include your address inside the envelope.

For further information, please see our Ordering FAQ.

CONFERENCES

Healing Our Spirit Worldwide: The Fifth Gathering
August 6 to 11, 2006
Shaw Conference Centre
Edmonton, Alberta

The Healing Our Spirit Worldwide (HOSW) movement began as one person's vision to create an international forum and movement focused on the alcohol and drug abuse issues and programs in Indigenous communities throughout the global community. The 2006 gathering is being planned as a celebration of the health and healing of indigenous peoples around the world. Special features of this gathering include traditional ceremonies, an international marketplace, elder workshops and activities, youth and children's workshops and activities, and pre- and post-conference tours of indigenous communities. Cost of attendance is $80 for children, $295 for youth and seniors, $495 for adults. For more information and to register, go to www.hosw.com, phone 1-780-447-4675 or (toll-free) 1-866-999-4679, fax 1-780-488-6717 or write to

International Indigenous Council for HOSW
10975 - 124 Street
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5M 0H9

The 14th Annual David Berman Memorial Concurrent Disorders Conference: Rethinking How We Work In Mental Health & Addictions
May 29, 30, 31, 2006
The Coast Plaza Hotel & Suites
Vancouver, BC

This national conference is designed to provide clinicians/delegates with advanced training in concurrent disorders, including in-depth exploration of integrated treatment.

This annual conference brings together an interdisciplinary group of professionals which includes physicians, nurses, mental health counsellors, social workers, psychiatrists,

psychologists, alcohol and drug workers, administrators/managers, community health workers, law enforcement officers, educators, policy makers, researchers, families, students, and all who are interested in or who work in the field of mental health and addictions.

Visit www.interprofessional.ubc.ca for updated information and to register. For additional information, e-mail ipad@interchange.ubc.ca or call 604-822-7524.

The conference is sponsored by Vancouver Coastal Health Dual Diagnosis Program and Interprofessional Continuing Education at the University of British Columbia.

Copyright & Disclaimer Statement
Privacy Statement

AADAC
ALBERTA ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE COMMISSION

Suite 200, 10909 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5J 3M9

ISSN: 1712-1736